The Language of Disability

Language and the words we use change our perceptions and how we interact with each other. While many of us are familiar with the Golden Rule, that encourages treating someone the way you wish to be treated, perhaps we should, instead, consider treating people as THEY wish to be treated. This means having conversations about the language we use and being thoughtful about why it matters.

What is disability?

Disability means "any impairment, including a physical, mental, intellectual, cognitive, learning, communication or sensory impairment – or a functional limitation – whether permanent, temporary or episodic in nature, or evident or not, that, in interaction with a barrier, hinders a person's full and equal participation in society."

https://www.canada.ca/en/employment-social-development/programs/accessible-people-disabilities/ act-summary.html#h2.02

From a slightly different approach, the World Health Organization (WHO), states that "disabilities are not defined in terms of specific categories of individuals, but rather as the interactions between people and the societies in which they live."

For additional information, please visit http://www.who.int/classifications/icf/en/index.html

More and more, society's understanding of disability is recognizing and embracing the fact that "disability" occurs when a person's functional needs are not addressed in their physical and social environment. This is an evolution from the traditional definition that viewed disability as a medical or health limitation that prevents or reduces a person's ability to participate fully in society.

By not considering disability a personal deficit or shortcoming, and instead thinking of disability as a social responsibility in which all people can be supported to live independent and full lives, it becomes easier to recognize and address challenges that all people – including those with disabilities – experience. In other words, the onus is on society, communities and program providers to accommodate for the needs of a person who has a disability, not on that person to adapt as a result of a barrier that is encountered in the environment. For example, instead of requiring participants who use a wheelchair to go around to the accessible entrance at the back of the building, modifications should be made to the main entrance so that everyone can have access to a facility via the same route. By making an event, activity or program inclusive, organizers aren't doing a favour for people who have a disability. This is a societal expectation.

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What is inclusion?

According to the Oxford dictionary, inclusion is defined as "the practice or policy of providing equal access to opportunities and resources for people who might otherwise be excluded or marginalized, such as those who have physical or mental disabilities and members of other minority groups." In the context of community participation, this embraces the concept that everyone should be able to have access to the facilities, activities, and experiences that meet their individual needs and goals. Inclusion is social interaction vs. simply being physical present. It is more than just providing access – it's about making sure people feel like they belong.

Ableism presents a significant barrier to achieving inclusion. Ableism is the practice of discrimination and social prejudice against people with disabilities. It is based on the belief that those who do not have a disability are superior. It defines people by their disability. In the same way that racism discriminates against people based on ethnicity, and sexism discriminates based on gender, ableism results in stereotypes, misconceptions and generalizations about people with disabilities. It can take on many forms including, using inappropriate words or choosing an inaccessible venue for a meeting or event, or failing to comply with legislation that promotes accessibility. Whatever its form, ableism is discrimination in favour of non-disabled people.

The best place to start working towards inclusion is with the person!

Be respectful:

- Look at, and talk to the person, not the person they're with or their interpreter

- Don't ignore or dismiss a person with a disability if communication with them is going to be challenging. Be patient and don't pretend to understand when you don't!

- Make no assumptions about the person's ability or disability.

- If in doubt, ask the person who has a disability about appropriate terminology.

Often, a disability need not be recognized or referred to if it has no bearing on the context or situation. A disability is an attribute just like hair colour, height and other personal characteristics. We don't automatically refer to these attributes when speaking to/about a person and the same should apply to reference to a person's disability. However, if you need to refer to the person in relation to their disability, using person-first language is appropriate. For example, a person who is blind rather than a blind person.

In some cases, however, people may prefer to have their disability referred to up front (disabled person rather than person with a disability). This language reflects the person's values, identity and the ways that the environment impacts on their participation in society. Asking the person what they prefer and respecting this preference is appropriate.

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People with disabilities are as diverse as society itself.

What about expressions?

This one is a bit tricky and it depends on context.

Expressions such as "Let's go for a walk," "It's nice to see you," "I haven't heard from you in a while," "Did you see that?" are fine and those with a disability will unlikely take offence. Someone who uses a wheelchair may say that they are going for a walk or choose to say that they are going for a wheel. Don't feel uncomfortable if you are walking or inviting them for a walk.

Phrases that present disability in a negative way or that suggest a stigma around disability should be avoided.

Appropriate depiction of people who have a disability

Sometimes people with disabilities are depicted as victims, helpless, heroic or courageous. While this may be true in some cases, pity and unjustified admiration or patronization is inappropriate. Every human faces challenges in life, and simply having a disability and living one's life does not make a person needy or inspirational.

Society has established both negative and positive stereotypes about people with disabilities. Negative and exaggerated portrayals send the wrong message, while positive and realistic depictions will enhance awareness and create opportunities for people with disabilities. Unfortunately, a negative portrayal is often reinforced by the media, having a detrimental influence on the way that people with disabilities are viewed and treated. Stereotyping paints a very narrow picture and does not allow for recognition of the full range of disabilities that are prevalent in our world. People with disabilities are as diverse as society itself.

In Summary

For people with disabilities and other marginalized groups to be included in all aspects of society, we must start with using appropriate language. We must be respectful of other people's preference and treat them/refer to them as they wish. These practices are the foundation of true inclusion.